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SUBJECT: MAKING ELECTIONS AFGHAN, WITH HELP

11. (SBU) At the semi-annual ISAF headquarters conference for the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) held February 25-26, key Afghan players on elections highlighted the dramatic increase in the capabilities of Afghan institutions, thanked international partners for their support, and spelled out requests for the 2009 elections. The Independent Election Commission (IEC) asked the PRTs to help construct IEC provincial offices, mentor the police and army in provincial-level election security planning and operations, and help coordinate the provision of logistical support -- especially air transport -- by the security forces to the IEC. The IEC encouraged ISAF and the Afghan security forces to incorporate international forces into election security plans to close the gap in the number of troops needed at polling centers on voting day.

INDEPENDENT AND SUSTAINABLE

12. (SBU) Dr. Azizullah Ludin, senior IEC Commissioner, on February 25 announced that the IEC, in its first independent electoral project, had exceeded its target of 2 million new voters for the just-concluded registration update by some 2.3 million additional voters, a resounding success. He noted a recent academic study concluded the Afghan IEC was a stronger, more competent organization than comparable electoral bodies in Iraq, Kosovo and East Timor. Only two years old, the IEC had started its work without desks or chairs, funded by a modest 600,000 USD government budget, and facing stiff salary competition from international organizations for staff with experience and skills. The IEC had overcome these challenges, and Ludin expressed the Commission's thanks to Afghan and international security forces for their support in voter registration. Deputy Interior Minister Mangal said, amid serious threats, successful security planning meant that during four months of voter registration only two police officers were killed, and only three officers and two election workers were injured, in connection with the process.

13. (SBU) Speaking three days before Karzai's ambiguous decree on the election date, Ludin carefully explained the Commission had based its choice of an August 20 election date on the Constitution, which called for a universal franchise. He acknowledged continuing "rumors" and "discussion" about an earlier date but underscored the Commission's political independence and steady work on its detailed plans for "free, fair, legitimate, and universal" elections on August 20. Looking ahead to future elections, the IEC hoped to establish permanent provincial offices, rather than continuing to lease space, to reduce costs to a level sustainable by the Afghan national budget. Ludin suggested the PRTs could contribute to this infrastructure development effort.

FOR ELECTIONS, EVEN BETTER

14. (SBU) Dr. Daoud Ali Najafi, Chief Technical Officer of

the IEC, on February 26 identified the IEC's "lessons learned" from voter registration for use in election planning.

-- The IEC, its international technical advisors, and the security forces benefit from time to plan election activities in advance.

-- The IEC needs to improve communication between its headquarters and field elements, partly through procedures, and partly by equipping more of the remote sites with satellite phones.

-- Election security works better when the IEC works closely with the security forces, and when, in turn, the different security elements -- police, army, intelligence and international forces -- clearly divide responsibilities. In particular, Najafi argued for greater use of the regional and provincial security coordination centers (OCC-Rs and OCC-Ps) as operation centers, with PRT or other international elements serving as mentors.

-- The IEC found local initiatives key to problem-solving, and will give its provincial offices more responsibility for planning election operations, movements of materials, and public outreach, including organizing the very effective local voter mobilization shuras.

15. (SBU) Najafi specifically requested ISAF consider how to help provide security to polling centers on voting day. He said that, with some 7000 voting sites nationwide, police resources will be inadequate. Police Colonel Alimas likewise emphasized this point at the IEC's weekly election security

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meeting on March 2. Alimas reported early police planning showed voting day would need 56,000 police devoted to election security. Even putting aside all other missions, such as border policing, the National Police have only 52,000 troops.

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